

## PORTRAIT SCULPTURE, A NEGLECTED FORM?

Jon Edgar wonders why portrait sculpture is overlooked in figurative art prizes

The occasional conversation between non-conceptual sculptors might touch upon the feeling of neglect and discrimination one faces from what is commonly perceived as the arts establishment, or to the abandonment of the competition as a viable outlet for getting work seen. In art competitions, the three-dimensional object doesn't really fit. It doesn't stack or transport easily, and artists cry out for airy spaces where sculpture can be walked around, both near and at a remove ... rather than just a bit of wall.

It is still nonetheless a sad day when another competition announces that judging of sculpture entries will be by photograph. The steady and growing pressure on the storage, movement and displaying of works has now firmly taken hold, with the Threadneedle Prize joining the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition making their primary sculpture considerations without the object in front of them. Whilst the environmental agenda and sheer practicality dictate that work should not be carted here and there when it is unlikely to be accepted, the issues seem to be two-fold. Firstly, that whilst it is an asset that artists working with three-dimensions should be able to present their work two-dimensionally, it cannot but start to favour the more obvious, political or conceptual work put forward for assessment. And secondly, that the playing field is no longer level. If sculpture is assessed by photo, then why not two-dimensional work? One might immediately comment that this would be ludicrous – Summer Exhibition entrants would be up in arms frantically trying to operate computers and digital cameras, not to mention the manipulation of jpegs.

At least organisations like ArtSway, the Arts Council-funded contemporary art centre in the New Forest, are fairhanded about their selection, along with many other Open exhibitions now. The submission for its Open sees no work being physically scrutinised prior to selection. However, they reassure artists that selectors have a great deal of experience in looking at work in reproduction and it does not detract from or influence the process. But does it not lead to the subconscious favouring of the more graphic?

These moves are not surprising when space is linked to a market rent, and these market rents dictate a level of efficiency of operation that errs in favour of works being held for as short a period of time as possible – and ideally none that haven't already been mostly decided upon. Artsway sensibly states that their limited space is increasingly needed for education work, no doubt in order that funders' targets be met.

Making an advanced search on 'new acquisitions' in the excellent collections database on the website for the National Portrait Gallery gives us some idea of the breadth of their developing collection. It is pleasing to see in 2008 portrait sculptures entering the collection – a silver head of Baron Bingham and bronze of Philip Pullman, both by Martin Jennings. The tradition of portraiture has continued largely unchanged for centuries – the odd conceptual work arriving (such as the 'essential identity' of Sir John Sulston courtesy of Marc Quinn's 2001 work comprising the subject's DNA in agar jelly, but works continue to provide predominantly visual rather than intellectual appeal, which is a rare thing these days.

Scrutinizing their current recent acquisitions category (which oddly doesn't mention the 2008 works, but will do for a quick analysis), there are 1,143 portraits listed. 1.5% are drawings. 2% are paintings; 5.5% prints. And photographs? Over 90%. And sculptures? Two. Or 0.25%(ish) of all recent acquisitions.



*Portrait of Wilfred Cass, 2008, by Jon Edgar*

This dominance of photographs might have some link to the demand on space and resources and perhaps to the differences in purchase cost, or prevalence of collections donated, but what does it say for the future demands of conservation of the less-stable printed image? On the other hand, sculpture lasts centuries and has universal appeal.

lament the absence of sculpture in our national portrait competition. Or even at least some parity with the other artforms in the collection. The National Portrait Gallery hosts the annual BP Prize which promotes the very best in contemporary portrait painting. Their annual Taylor Wessing Prize celebrates and promotes the very best in contemporary portrait photography. So it feels odd that there isn't a national consideration anywhere for portrait sculpture, apart from through the small society that promotes it in its own annual exhibition at a rented central London gallery space. I'm confident that a good dialogue exists between the organisations, but sadly sculpture plays second fiddle to every other portrait form.

Would not the BP make a better exhibition with half of the present selection of paintings removed and the take widened to include the breadth of all the non-photographic forms the NPG has ever included in its collections?

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